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ABSTRACT

This report describes the development of two British projects designed to increase support to persons paid to care for unrelated children in their homes, and to improve the quality of childminding. Informal Drop-In Centres offering stimulating play experiences for the children under the guidance of a trained playleader/community worker were established in Lewisham and Islington--two areas known to contain many childminders caring for children under 5 years old. Bunbury Trust money was used initially to fund the projects. Social Services, the registery agency for childminders, funded the Lewisham and Islington projects after initial periods of 18- and 24-months, respectively. Descriptions are given of how the projects differed during the implementation process in terms of staffing, home visits to the childminders, the Drop-In Centre sites, and the transition from Bunbury sponsorship to Social Services sponsorship. Mistakes and disappointments encountered in the process of implementation are described for the purpose of aiding others working with childminders. It is suggested, in conclusion, that implementation of these projects has lead to clarification of the childminders' needs and to the raising of standards of good quality care. (Author/JA)

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FOCUS ON CHILDMINDERS

A PROFILE OF THE FIRST BUNBURY DROP-IN CENTRES

Sheila M. Shinman

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PREFACE

The projects take their name from a Miss E. M. Bunbury who died in 1971 and who had been interested all her life in the welfare of under-privileged children. In her Will she left the residue of her estate to a charitable trust intended to further research into how best to encourage and enrich the education of young children.

The trustees originally appointed had been Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Isaacs and Dr. John Bowlby. Since Mr. Isaacs had already died, responsibility fell on Mrs. Isaacs and Dr. Bowlby.

Owing to the trust being the residuary legatee, it was uncertain how much money would be available. Initially it was £8,000 and it was this sum for which the trustees in 1973 were seeking a suitable use.

In view of Miss Bunbury's known concerns for experimental work in the field of child care, the trustees decided to approach the Inner London Pre-school Playgroups Association to see whether the Association might have any suitable project to propose. This resulted in an initial meeting in October 1973 at which it was suggested that a pioneer project might be undertaken with child minders, who were recognised as being an important but a much neglected group concerned with child care. From this initial meeting the projects in Lewisham and Islington were born.

INTRODUCTION

This is a shortened account of the first two Bunbury Projects. It covers the period from December 1974 to the autumn of 1978 and is based on daily logs kept by the Project Leaders and the Co-ordinator, together with information supplied from Social Service records. The aim is to describe the very different ways the Projects developed, including disappointments, setbacks and mistakes, so that others working with childminders may judge the relevance of Bunbury experience to their own locality and situation.

Crucial questions remain unanswered in regard to childminding. Can practical support from the local authority or voluntary organisation result in improved standards? What sort of support is most effective? What proportion of minders is likely to benefit from or respond to which types of support? How long will it take? What will it cost?

Clearly it is outside the scope of two such small projects to provide comprehensive answers. Nevertheless, given the lack of monitoring of many of the mushrooming schemes involving childminders, it may be useful to draw together what has been learned.

THE BACKGROUND

The idea for both projects came from observers and not from the minders themselves.

The media had brought to light and stressed a few extreme cases of poor child care; but the Bunbury Trustees and representatives of Inner London Pre-school Playgroups Association (ILPPA) though that such hyper-critical and biased publicity was damaging to the self-respect and confidence of the majority of responsible minders. There was therefore a need to give minders increased support and a sense of group identity, as well as to improve the quality of much child-minding.

The ILPPA representatives felt that many mothers who had become involved in playgroups had later realised how much the experience had increased their own self-confidence and enjoyment in their children's company. Not only did they find that they were not alone in their day to day problems and anxieties, but at a playgroup they often observed different ways of responding to children and were able to experiment with a variety of inexpensive play activities which they could try out at home. Attitudes to bringing up children often seemed to be modified by this experience; mothers said that they felt quite differently as they began to understand more about their children's play needs.

Yet few childminders who were daily caring for under-fives were thought likely to avail themselves of this type of experience. There were at least two basic reasons; playgroup fees would erode income and practical difficulties stemming from rigid playgroup hours would inhibit attendance. With the help of Bunbury Trust money, however, it would be possible to make similar facilities freely and more informally available, to see how far experience with parent-involved playgroups was relevant for childminders. Such a project, if it met the needs of minders, was seen as a valuable complement to support provided by the statutory body.

It was decided, with the trustees' agreement, to use the £8,000 available to fund two separate projects rather than put all the resources into one scheme. £4,000 was used to initiate separate schemes in two priority areas where there were known to be many childminders caring for significant numbers of under-fives. It was understood that each would be funded by the local Social Services when Bunbury Trust money was exhausted. Thus continuity was assured.

From this point the two schemes in Lewisham and Islington developed side by side but quite independently. **Both projects shared the following characteristics:**

1. They aimed to reach childminders, whether registered or not, to deepen their understanding of their role and, where needed, to give active support in helping them improve their understanding of children's emotional and play needs – to improve the quality of minding.
2. The main initiatives were directed to all registered minders in clearly defined catchment areas. Each group numbered between thirty and forty.
3. The initial intention was to provide informal Drop-in Centres with stimulating play facilities for the children under the guidance of a trained playleader/community worker.
4. Central to the schemes – if it met the needs of minders – was to encourage them to take responsibility for a playgroup for the minded children.
5. Both the schemes, initially, were allocated £4,000. These sums were administered by ILPPA. They provided for staff; they covered general expenses, rent and basic equipment for informal Drop-in Centres for initial periods of 18 and 24 months respectively.
6. Social Services undertook to find premises for the Drop-in Centres and to fund the projects after the initial period.
7. There was close co-operation between ILPPA, the Social Services in each Borough, and in Lewisham with the local Branch of the Pre-school Playgroups Association. There was no PPA Branch in Islington at that
8. Support Groups representatives from each of the above bodies

met together with the field workers at regular intervals. Both Groups had the same independent chairman who liaised with the Bunbury Trustees and was responsible for monitoring the projects.

THE BUNBURY PROJECT IN LEWISHAM

INITIAL PERIOD: 18 MONTHS

Social Services' viewpoint

Lewisham Social Services recognised that many childminders did an excellent job. They found that minders offered good continuity of care and valuable peripheral help.

Three small informal groups for childminders, including an experimental toy library, had already been started in different areas as part of the Council's policy of offering constant and continuing support. Friendly non-official guidance was considered necessary and a casual, informal approach. Some minders were suspicious of authority and it was difficult to break through the emotional barrier, but others were eager to come together and had expressed concern about standards.

Much more help was needed but Social Services were under-staffed and unable to give the support they wished to childminders.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHEME

Staffing

The Support Group decided to appoint three part-time workers (November 1974). The Project Leader had wide playgroup experience, one assistant had local authority playgroup experience and the other was a trained nursery nurse. Personalities and specific skills varied, but they all shared a flexible approach, warmth, concern, humour and energy.

Hours were fitted in with school hours and holidays. The two assistants were employed 15 hours weekly and the project leader for 18 hours for 36 weeks a year. The extra hours were for recording and writing up. Salary, at £1 an hour, was higher than the average for a playleader at that time. After one term, at the team's request, all three members worked on an equal basis, with equal responsibility, for 16 hours a week.

Initially each team member was to spend two weekly sessions of three hours each at the proposed playgroup/Drop-in Centre; one three hour session was allocated to planning, consultation and support and the remaining time was to be spent visiting minders in their homes.

Premises

Social Services helped to find suitable premises in the United Re-

formed Church; these were centrally situated on the main road and near the shopping centre – a huge, rambling building with a rather draughty church hall, a stage and a number of rooms off it, a well-equipped kitchen, poor toilets and a heating problem. Other groups using the premises included a mother and toddler club, a lunch club and a discussion group for the elderly.

The Catchment Area

The catchment area covered approximately one square mile of central Lewisham, which qualified for Urban Aid. No figures were available for the precise area, but it fell within the Central District where, according to the 1971 Census, over one-third of the houses were owner-occupied. 'A rough estimate' (Osborne, 1975) was that one in ten children under five might be the child of a single parent. The same survey found almost 12% of all residents in the Central District had been born in the New Commonwealth and findings suggested that the majority were from the West Indies. One in four of all the married women under 45 had one or more children under 5; just over one in three of the married women and just over half the single mothers were working full or part-time.

The Bunbury Project was concerned with one small section within the Central District. The catchment area was largely composed of substantial semi-detached and terraced houses and a rather run-down council estate. Many houses had minute front gardens with bigger gardens at the rear. Few houses had a garage, but cars were close-parked along the kerbs.

A pleasant park provided an open space for playing as well as an enclosed play area with swings but, as a busy main road bisected the neighbourhood, many minders did not have easy access to it. For minders with several young children, with prams and shopping to contend with, there was the added difficulty of living in a hilly district. Once one left the main road which followed a river valley, there were rising slopes on either side.

The central Lewisham shopping area was within easy reach and the new Catford shopping centre was only a short distance by bus. The Town Hall and all main social service offices were also within easy reach. In addition to good leisure time facilities, there were five play-groups, a day nursery which catered for 60 priority children with 41 on the waiting list (April 1975) and a health clinic.

THE EXPLORATORY STAGE

Home Visiting

After consultation with the Local Authority Officers, the team began

by visiting all the 40 registered minders on the official lists. This was completed in the first months and was made possible by team members' use of their own transport. Only 26 out of 40 minders were found still to be minding – a reflection of the difficulty experienced by Social Services in keeping abreast of change among childminders. Within a very short time, however, due to newly registered minders and those applying for registration, the number of minders on the visiting list had risen to 38. Initially all minders were visited monthly; subsequently, unless they already used a playgroup, non-users of the Centre were visited every one or two weeks. Visits lasted between one and two hours.

The project workers were, without exception, made welcome. They had no statutory responsibility for registration and never asked whether minders were registered or not. The reason for the first visit was to acquaint minders with the possibility of an informal playgroup for the minded children which would offer facilities they could not readily provide at home. At the same time, minders were asked about the days and times that would be most convenient for them and whether this was indeed the sort of support they wanted.

If a minder was not at home, and approximately 50% were out on the first day-time call, an explanatory note was left prior to a follow-up visit.

The team was careful to explain that the idea was not for minders to leave the children; there was no intention of usurping a minder's responsibility for the children while she was at the Centre. They did not give advice about minding or try to alter a minder's way of doing things in her home, they listened and tried to understand the minder's problems and worries as well as to share in her pleasure in the children. Later, indirectly and informally, they tried to encourage minders who might be giving cause for concern, to improve the quality of care.

The Drop-in Centre

Minders responded with interest to the possibility of a Drop-in Centre, as outlined by the team. The doors opened on January 9th, 1975, for two weekly morning sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays – in retrospect, not the best time of year to begin. The following week, the first minder came with two children. What did they find?

There was always a welcome cup of tea or coffee for the minders; those who formed the nucleus of attenders soon took it upon themselves to make tea and offer it to newcomers. There was an opportunity to meet other minders and to share and exchange views and ideas on common problems and interests.

A wide variety of stimulating play awaited the children, attractively

set out. The intimidating vastness of all the hall was broken down into small 'corners' by the use of rugs and arranging equipment in alcoves. The home corner dominated the stage, with telephone, stove and cooking utensils. Other corners were for dressing up, books and music. There were tables for finger painting and easels with plentiful supplies of paper, large brushes and clean, bright, non-drip paint. Activities included woodwork and imaginative play. There was a well-stocked junk box, water play and dry and wet sand. All these activities were not available from the beginning, nor were they necessarily all out for each play session. This enabled the team to involve the minders in choosing what equipment should be bought and to take a personal interest and responsibility in the development of the centre. It was nevertheless important that the hall should look sufficiently attractive to catch the attention of anyone who came – whether it was two people or twenty.

It soon became obvious that this 'informal playgroup' differed from the conventional type in a number of fundamental ways; first of all, it was free and completely informal. Whereas a normal playgroup is registered for a limited number (usually about 20 children) aged three to five who attend each session, it was never possible here to know in advance how many people would be coming or what the age range would be. Most children attending were babies, toddlers or of playgroup age. Minders' older children also began to 'drop-in', evidently finding the activities and atmosphere at the Centre more attractive than school.

In addition, the team was concerned to encourage parents to come to the Centre. Although normally at work when it was open, parents were involved in evening meetings and special events. Minders also brought their friends who were always welcome. They sometimes turned out to be unregistered minders who subsequently registered, or mothers who were interested in the possibility of minding and who wanted to have a look round and get to know about minding without committing themselves in any way.

All this called for a wider variety of equipment to appeal to different ages than is necessary in a conventional playgroup, together with the knowledge and skill to discourage attendance where necessary and to cope positively with allcomers simultaneously.

A further point of difference was that no official register was kept, although in practice there was a visitors' book kept by one of the minders. This was an important safety precaution in case of fire or other emergency; it was necessary to know how many people were in the building.

It was an open question whether minders would wish to stay with the children at the Centre and participate in their play. The anticipated

problem of minders who wished to 'drop and run' hardly arose, however. On one occasion when a minder 'slipped out' for a few minutes, the other minders objected strongly; it was informally understood that this was not permitted. Thus in further contrast to conventional playgroups, minders were technically responsible for their children and always stayed with them, although, especially at first, some appreciated being able to relax while the team played with the children.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Minders coming to the Centre grew in numbers, reaching a peak at one session in June of the first year, with 27 minders and 66 children. Although such numbers were gratifying, such a situation was far from satisfactory. The team no longer had time to listen and talk to minders in a relaxed way and the quality of play for children of playgroup age (three to five years) was endangered by interference from young children. There was insufficient suitable equipment for the younger age group and more adult help was needed to cope with the numbers.

This was natural growth point in the development of the project. The minders themselves asked for an evening meeting to discuss the future of the Drop-in Centre with which they were now closely identified. As a result, a nucleus of nine minders (including two who lived outside the catchment area) volunteered to help on a rota basis, but there was no support for the idea of taking formal responsibility for a registered playgroup. It was unanimously decided to raise money in a variety of ways to buy extra equipment.

The team suggested a reorganisation of the layout of the room so that the younger children did not hamper the older ones at play. At first, the idea was to use one of the adjoining rooms for the younger children and their minders. This seemed a reasonable solution for the under threes; but it was strongly resisted by minders with babies. They thought the team wanted to 'get rid of them'. The agreed solution was to divide the hall in two with benches, leaving a way through for children and adults. The older children's play was concentrated on the platform and the side farthest away from the entrance. Younger children had their own sand and water play and could easily be diverted away from the 'playgroup' area.

Many experiments were made in the way equipment was arranged. The team considered it an important factor in helping or hindering minders' participation in the children's play. One crucial placing was 'the table'. In the early stages, minders tended to congregate round a table placed near the kitchen and chat.

The problem was how to arouse interest in the children's activities

without being too directive. This usually happened spontaneously as a result of the children's absorption in play and the gradual lessening of the need to talk through other matters. 'The table' was first placed near the kitchen for convenience, then it was moved nearer the door so that a new minder did not have to walk across a very large hall. Later on, to encourage participation, it was incorporated in the play area. Any activities introduced for the first time were placed there so that minders still at the stage of sitting round the table were more easily infected by the excitement of children discovering new play. This seemed actively to speed minders' growing awareness of, and interest in, what the children were doing.

Training

There was no formal training at the Centre. Many minders were extremely experienced and resented any inference that they needed further 'training'. A minority (8%) expressed a desire for formal training. 32% opposed the idea and the remaining 60% seemed to have no definite views. In the context of situations at the Centre and at home, topics which might be anticipated in a course for childminders naturally cropped up. These were potential learning points for everyone, including the team. They had to be ready to listen, inform, suggest or demonstrate according to the occasion, the minder or group of minders.

In the course of discussion, two strands of development could be discerned. Some minders were benefiting from the experience and ideas of others and from suggestions or observations from the team; other minders, who would have been astounded at the suggestion that they had anything to contribute at a formal level to a debate on child care found that they knew, from experience, more than they thought. Confidence in their own judgement was slowly beginning to build up. It was considered important at this stage that the team did not condemn or belittle suggestions from some minders. It was sometimes necessary to accept a suggestion, not necessarily the best in objective terms, but which marked a stage in growth.

It was vital that individual team members knew what their objectives were and, in making this sort of decision, why they were making it. The first objective was to build confidence, where this was necessary, and then to develop greater awareness and higher standards.

As well as group discussion, minders were encouraged to observe the children and to record what they saw, but it was the quality of absorbing play which the team provided for the children which was perhaps the chief stimulus to discussion and the widening of horizons.

The general observation, supported by Childminding Officers, was that

not only did toys become more evident in minders' homes, but there was more discrimination in the choice of toy and fewer of the cheap plastic variety. More positive and imaginative use was made of everyday materials for play with children. Through the opportunity to experiment with different media themselves, minders began to accept and appreciate what 'messy' play could mean for children. Increased awareness of the importance of talking and listening to children was manifest as well as greater understanding and ability to cope with problems inherent in the childminding situation.

A nucleus of some twenty minders in the catchment area, and some 60 children, came regularly every one or two weeks. Eleven others and 30 children maintained close links with the Centre but came less regularly. Seven minders did not visit the Centre or dropped away after one visit. Numbers tended to fluctuate with the weather (the hall could be icy cold) and when there was 'flu about. The most noticeable fluctuation occurred at the beginning of each term when numbers fell away. This was a time when intensive home visiting was needed. The team considered home visiting of central importance to the success of the project. Minders seemed to appreciate calls from someone who listened to their troubles, who had something concrete to offer the children and who came regularly and informally with a genuine concern for them as individuals. "They don't come to check on childminding or your home or the children. They come to check on you and make sure you're all right." Even minders who did not wish to come to the Centre were welcoming and gave the impression of wanting further visits from the team. "At least they popped in and saw us, even when we couldn't get down" (to the Centre).

The team found it very helpful to see the children in the more familiar environment of the minder's home. Sometimes children behaved very differently at the Centre and at home. A child who remained very quiet and withdrawn at the Centre could be extremely talkative at home. The silence was a reflection of the need to observe and take things in before getting involved.

In such a case, it would only be a question of time before the child was fully integrated into the play at the Centre. In other cases, however, home visiting afforded an opportunity for a minder to voice confidentially and in an informal way any worries she might have about the child's development or perhaps about the relationship with parents. Very often all that was needed was an opportunity to 'talk it out'; sometimes team members were able to suggest where a minder could go for practical help with her problem – perhaps her social worker or local advice centre – and if necessary accompany her for moral support. In an

extreme case, suspected child battering for example, they would liaise with Social Services.

The Centre was closed during school holidays. Although this fitted in well with the family commitments of the team, it was considered detrimental to the continuity of the scheme. This was felt so keenly that one member of the team worked voluntarily through the summer holiday in a summer scheme run by the User's Committee at the Church. This was a worthwhile venture which also depended largely for its success on home visits, personal invitations and reminders to individual minders. One advantage was that it brought minders and mothers, as well as some parents of the minded children, together in joint social activities. On a small scale, it began to break down some of the prejudice which existed in people's minds about childminders. "Fancy, she's quite nice really, and those children are as bright as buttons."

TRANSITION TO SOCIAL SERVICES

The transition from the Bunbury funded project administered by ILPPA to Lewisham Social Services was scheduled to take place in April, 1976.

Unfortunately, a recent government ruling precluded the employment of new staff by the Local Authority. Social Services were therefore unable to employ the Bunbury team.

As a temporary solution, administration of the local government grant already voted for the Bunbury Project was passed to the local branch of the Pre-school Playgroups Association which agreed to administer the grant and employ the team. This was a considerable undertaking for a small group of volunteers whose major concern was local playgroups. Their action made the continuation of the project possible.

SEPTEMBER 1976 – JULY 1978

What should have been a period of consolidation turned out to be an unsettled period of change with fluctuating attendance. An intransigent heating problem at the 'Drop-in' led to a search for alternative accommodation. Arrangements were made for transfer to another church hall about five minutes walk away. The new premises were in a good state of decoration; they were clean and warm. There was a small room for storage and good kitchen and toilet facilities. A playgroup was already using part of the premises. Some minders would be obliged to cross a main road to reach it, however; others had become attached to the existing centre and felt more at home there.

Other unsettling factors were the resignation of the Project Leader and

the knowledge that another team member would be unable to continue after the following February.

This situation marked another turning point in the development of the project. One of the stated objectives of the scheme had been to encourage and enable minders to take an active part in running a 'playgroup' for the minded children themselves. Although they had shown increased interest in the children's play needs, it was thought they were not ready to take on any added responsibility for the group, that this was not appropriate to their needs. Both team and minders felt the support of experienced play leaders was necessary.

When the team was depleted and needed help, however, a number of minders showed that they were willing and able to take responsibility, at least on a temporary basis. The Support Group decided to appoint only one new team member, dividing the hours available between two staff, and to consider the possibility of employing a minder to help at the play sessions. After a trial period, however, it was found that in spite of competent help from minders with children's play, it was desirable to have two members of the team available for play sessions.

Perhaps the most cogent reason for reverting to a team of three from September 1977, was the growth of more Bunbury Drop-in Centres.

Additional support from the Bunbury Trustees financed a further session for one year, provided that the Local Authority agreed to take responsibility thereafter. This enabled some minders who had been coming to the Centre from outside the catchment area, with the help of Social Services, to find premises nearer their homes. With the support of one team member, they began to develop their own self-help Bunbury Centre in Forest Hill. A nucleus of some nine minders and 17 children meets regularly (1978) and are attracting more minders from the immediate vicinity.

Another small group developed in Deptford following the move to that part of the Borough of a minder who had shown particular interest and ability in helping at the original Drop-in Centre. She was encouraged by her local Childminding Visiting Officer and the Bunbury team, together with other minders, to start a new Bunbury Group. Ideal premises were available at Deptford Green School and with the support of two team members, a small group of six minders and 13 children hold regular weekly meetings. They have followed the B.B.C. Programme 'Other People's Children' with interest, and like the Forest Hill Group, are using the Open University Course designed for parents with young children (October 1978).

In the early spring of 1977, numbers at the 'mother' group had de-

clined. In addition to factors already mentioned, this was due to the channelling off to other centres of some minders, to the withdrawal from minding of others and to removal from the neighbourhood. It was also noted that a different kind of minder was attracted to the newer and more presentable premises; some, who had felt happier in the original hall, dropped away. In summer 1978, it was decided to open the original Drop-in Centre for one session a week only. Average attendance was 14 minders and 30 children.

The most recent stage of development (September 1978) is the setting up of a number of Bunbury 'self-help' groups in different parts of the Borough, run by minders, with peripatetic support from the Bunbury team and encouragement from the Childminding Visiting Officers. Three new groups are just beginning; two are together already catering for 12 minders and 18 children. All groups are linked by a Bunbury newsletter, and periodic joint meetings and excursions, together with the will to maintain high standards among childminders.

THE BUNBURY PROJECT IN ISLINGTON

Social Services' Viewpoint

In contrast to Lewisham, professional workers in this Borough had serious misgivings about much of the care offered by childminders, although they also recognised that some minders met a real need. It was felt that childminders were inevitable since they were the only form of day care available for many two-parent families in which both parents worked full-time. Other day care facilities were already over-subscribed by more needy families. Particular concern was expressed about disturbed children in the care of minders, especially where there were marked cultural differences and lack of stability. Standards needed to be raised considerably to make childminding a generally acceptable form of childcare. The chief objectives therefore from Social Services' viewpoint were to improve the quality of minding and its image, and to raise the status of minders, so that childminding could play a reliable and valuable role alongside other forms of pre-school provision.

There was a particular need in the Tollington area of Islington for extra help and support for minders. Census figures showed that it had the highest number of under-fives in the Borough and a high proportion of these were minded children. Consequently a project that focused on the needs of minders and minded children was especially welcome.

IMPLEMENTATION

Although only two months elapsed between the inception of the

schemes in Lewisham and Islington, the economic climate worsened so dramatically in the interim that both staffing and premises were adversely affected. Implementation of the second scheme was therefore very different.

The intention had been to appoint a Project Leader for the Bunbury scheme to work part-time throughout the year (17½ hours a week) on an initial contract of two years. She would work closely with, but be independent of, two part-time social workers with special responsibility for childminders to be employed by Islington Social Services. The Bunbury worker was to be mainly responsible for developing a drop-in centre in premises to be found by Islington Social Services. If and when a group of minders was ready to form a playgroup, Islington Social Services undertook to make a grant available. This would be administered by ILPPA until the group was able to administer it themselves. Such a grant, renewable annually, would continue after the Bunbury funded project. In this way, continuity would be achieved.

Staffing and Premises

Cuts in Council spending, however, meant that only one of the part-time social workers was appointed by Islington Social Services and the cost of necessary renovation and repairs to the short-life property designated for the Bunbury scheme escalated to prohibitive proportions. As there was a dearth of suitable premises in the area, the Bunbury Project was therefore left without a base, both as a place from which to work and for a drop-in centre.

Catchment Area

The result was that the Bunbury worker (non-statutory) and the social worker (statutory) both operated from the Tollington Area Social Services office. This was centrally situated in one square mile or so of the densely populated, multi-racial community in which they worked. Much of the housing was multi-occupied; it included streets of demolition sites, new estates, sub-standard property, tower blocks and no green spaces. Fifteen percent of the female work force in Islington came from this area and this percentage was the highest in the Borough. There were thought to be many childminders, both registered and unregistered.

EXPLORATORY STAGE

Even without a base for a 'Drop-in' Centre there was plenty that could be done.

The Social Services list of childminders named about 50 minders, with 18 in the process of registration. This proved to be so out of date that when everybody had been visited, only 20 remained. The rest had given up minding, moved or died.

Home Visiting

Numbers soon built up again, however, and within three months, 32 minders were being visited regularly. On average, each minder cared for three children under five, including her own. Initially she was visited at least twice by one or both workers. Their role at this stage in the Project was seen as essentially supportive. Approaches by the Project Leader were 'open-ended' – although the long term aim was to interest minders in the possibility of a playgroup, there was no intention of imposing such a facility.

Although it was clear to both workers that there was often a lack of stimulating play for the children, this was not a top priority for minders. Their major problems concerned money – how much to charge? . . . . how to cope with holidays and illness, absentees? Close second came 'parents' – those who did not pay, who failed to collect their children at the agreed time, who spoke no English and whose cultural background was so different that dietary and other difficulties arose. Real language barriers existed – to the extent that minders did not even know or failed to get their tongues round a child's name – "I call him Robert, but I've no idea what his real name is."

Although the minders themselves were mainly Londoners, with a few Italians, Greek and Maltese, the children came from a wide range of countries and cultures and many of them heard no English at home.

It seemed that many mother used childminders not from choice but mainly because there were not enough nursery places. These mothers had to work, sometimes for medical reasons or financial pressures or to relieve depression. They seemed prejudiced against minders following bad publicity in the press and also preferred to place a child in a day nursery because it was often cheaper than with a minder.

First impressions suggested that most of the minders were hard-working, responsible, caring women, doing their best for young and often very difficult children and their parents. They were working-class mothers with little formal education, yet they were sometimes criticised for not being child care experts, dieticians, teachers, nurses and social workers rolled into one. Rewards were not high, yet the responsibilities were considerable. They were isolated in their job and had hitherto received little support from the statutory body.

At the outset, however, some minders were sceptical of 'support' from any outside agency or Social Services. In the past they had been subject to many changes in personnel and/or infrequent visits.

Such then was the situation which challenged both workers. Although the need to include parents was recognised, at that stage it was thought preferable to let the minders work through their aggressive feelings towards them and to develop their own group identity. Emphasis lay in policies which would break down minders' isolation and resolve some of their major problems and frustrations.

Home visits were undoubtedly the most important aspect of the next stage. They gave an opportunity for the workers to build up friendly relationships with the minders and their families. They also provided an informal opportunity for chatting about play and introducing, when appropriate, new ideas.

Evening Meetings

Regular monthly evening meetings in the Social Services Office were an important innovation. Meetings were comparatively informal – subjects discussed ranged over almost all aspects of childminding, and included toilet training, cultural differences, speech development and non-accidental injury. At this stage, such topics were not pursued in any depth, but they reflected the interest of the developing group.

Response was very encouraging, with 100% attendance on the first occasion and a subsequent attendance rate averaging 65%. One decision which cemented the group was that they should all charge the same sum of money for the same services. Minders began to compare notes, to advise and also to criticise each other. If one of their number did not come up to scratch, they were prepared to say so. Some minders had been much angered by what they considered unfair and detrimental publicity and were concerned for their reputation.

Evidence of problems over rates of pay, retaining fees and free milk led the workers to re-design registration forms and to provide standard information sheets for parents. These told enquirers the normal financial arrangements and suggested ways in which parents could help both the child and the minder – for example, letting him take along a favourite toy and making sure that the minder knew how to reach the mother in an emergency. Personal letters of introduction to minders were also supplied as well as record cards for minders' use.

Evening meetings also provided a useful forum for discussion with health visitors who began to work more closely with the project and social worker. A number of 'self-help' schemes took root, including a 'swop' shop and bulk buying of baby food. All this activity was reported

in a newsletter which was circulated to all minders regardless of whether they came to the meetings. Care was taken, both at the meetings and in the newsletter, not to discourage unregistered minders. First names only were used and phrases like "minders. their family and friends came", enabling unregistered minders to come along to subsequent meetings without feeling they "would have their names taken".

Registration

Although not officially responsible for registration, the Bunbury Project leader was involved in this side of the work. Advice and support for this role was offered by the Senior Social Worker.

Much time was spent trying to work out standards of registration which it was generally felt should be brought into line with fostering. It was decided that criteria for registration should extend beyond the physical suitability of the accommodation to a minder's mental attitudes, her understanding of the young child and its development, as well as her awareness of the problems of the minded child and its parents.

One problem facing the two workers was how to contact unregistered minders. It soon became clear that one of the best ways of reaching them was through known minders. Attitudes seemed to change as registered minders became convinced of the genuine desire of the Project Worker and of Social Services to understand their problems and to offer practical support. Some unregistered minders came to the evening meetings out of sheer curiosity (two to the first one); the existence of others was indicated by minders or found from their advertisements on local boards. Such minders were normally willing to register once the situation was explained to them.

Once records had been updated, it seemed clear there were not enough minders to meet demand (April 1975). The situation was very fluid, however, and after about eight months, the balance between those seeking minders and those offering the service was just about equal. Subsequently, for a few months, it seemed there were minders with vacancies.

This was thought to arise from two main factors. One was the increase in local unemployment. Where a husband was on short time or had lost his job, he would stay at home and look after the children, even if the wife was still working. When money was short, some way had to be found to save on minders' fees. The other factor was the policy of matching minder to child.

Policy of 'Matching'

As has already been pointed out, the area was very cosmopolitan.

Difficulties arose where minders could not communicate adequately with a child or his parents – for example, where a non-English speaking Greek lady cared for children all of differing cultures and languages or where a Turkish child was placed with a minder who could not communicate adequately with either the child or the parents.

Hitherto, children had found their way to a minder by information passed by word of mouth within the community. Recognising that many problems stemmed from incompatibility of minder and minded, both workers tried to 'match' minders to children. Wherever possible, mothers seeking a minder were given an 'in-depth' interview and an introductory letter to a particular minder only when minding was established as the best type of provision for the family. A request for a minder sometimes masked needs that were not met by leaving a child with a minder – a mother might be feeling guilty at "getting rid" of the child. It helped to talk about it so that someone else knew how she felt even if there was no alternative, or for advice to be given against minding if that was really what the mother wanted.

Minders' wishes were also taken into account – for example, preference for a particular age group. Some minders who restricted the ages, or colour of children they would accept, subsequently found themselves without anyone to care for.

Changing Attitudes

In the first months, both the Project Leader and the social worker felt strongly that, even had premises been available, a playgroup or Drop-in Centre would have been quite inappropriate.

Reasons put forward which prevented minders from attending local training courses – "mid-day was a hopeless time of day", "normal routines were adversely affected" – were thought by the Project Worker to operate in the context of a playgroup as well.

Attitudes began to change after six months. When the most pressing needs of minders were beginning to be met and a sense of group identity was increasingly evident, and following a visit to the Lewisham Bunbury Project, the workers began to feel that after all, a similar 'Drop-in' Centre might benefit the minders in Islington.

THE DROP-IN CENTRES

1. MITFORD ROAD

A second part-time Bunbury playleader/community worker was appointed in October, 1975, and active steps were taken to find accommodation independently of Social Services. In January, 1976, a room was rented one day a week at the local YMCA. Although the premises

themselves were very suitable, the location was not convenient for the majority of minders. Nevertheless, nine minders and 13 children plus three visitors 'dropped in' on the first day.

The group met for only three sessions at the YMCA, as temporary accommodation was offered by the Council in a disused Day Nursery in Mitford Road, pending a decision on the future use of the premises. They were close to Social Service offices and ideally situated for most minders.

The 'Minder's Play Club' met at the Mitford Road Centre on Wednesdays and Thursdays from the middle of February, 1976, from 10.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. The first day coincided with half term, with the result that 39 children visited. Seventeen of these were full-time minded children in the company of nine minders. The rest of the children were minders' own family. Minders were responsible for the children and were encouraged to take an active part in the play, to observe and to discuss what was happening to the children. Overt criticism was avoided. Many of the members were experienced mothers who had brought up their own children and had strong views on discipline and the needs of children. A dogmatic approach was thought likely to alienate and to destroy the basis on which future learning could take place. The playleader made clear, in a natural way, how she responded to children. Minders were especially interested in the way she coped with her own four year old, and did not always agree with her point of view. She was always ready to explain tactfully her attitudes and actions and to listen to another's opinion. As respect for her knowledge and judgement grew, more activities and discussion were generated. In the informal atmosphere, even the shyest minder began to speak out.

Attendance

Gradually a pattern developed at the Centre. A nucleus of seven or eight minders visited each session with 18-22 children. This was more than enough for the Playleader to cope with, even with the help of a student from New Barnet House, Oxford, on placement with the Project. A few minders came regularly to both sessions, others felt that once a week was enough, others again came less often.

The numbers of older children increased considerably during school holidays and highlighted the need for at least two project workers to be present and for a suitable range of equipment.

Changes in the Group

It seemed that minders came initially 'for the children'; the idea was growing that "you need something for the children". "Getting out of

the house" was seen as another advantage, as well as "meeting other minders". This helped to break down the isolation and loneliness felt by many minders. Another advantage in coming to the Centre voiced by minders was that they could be reasonably sure of catching the social worker or could leave a message for her during a session.

At first there seemed to be little headway in stimulating interest in children's play needs. Only gradually minders began to see what a tremendous responsibility they had for children who were often deprived – with one or both parents at work and mothers who were worried and depressed. Playing with children could be exciting and rewarding – even young babies would benefit from more to look at and listen to. They also began to appreciate more fully that there was a difference between the cultural experience at home and with them. Even the seemingly inconsequential and thoughtless behaviour of some parents was better understood in the light of shared opinions. One remark from a parent reported and discussed in the group was typical – "You English, you are uncultured and unfeeling – in my country you would never dream of saying 'come at six' . . . . . it would be 'come when you can' . . ."

Misunderstanding and hurt on both sides could obviously stem from such cultural differences; group discussion appeared to foster understanding of and positive attitudes towards parents.

Although all groups do not necessarily pass through the same stage, it may be helpful to record the discernible stages through which this group passed:–

Stages in Group Development

At first, there was disbelief among the unco-ordinated group of minders that anyone was seriously interested in their problems or intended taking practical steps to help them.

Following the evening meetings, when something had been achieved – standardisation of fees at £7 a week, the opening of 'their' Centre – minders began to get high aspirations and some even became aggressive. 'Power' vested in one individual could cause problems – quite simple things like having a key which gave access to the premises not afforded to all minders.

Open, honest discussion was vital at this stage. Minders were able to complain to the playleader who was always completely straightforward with them. When they had a grievance, the Centre provided an outlet for it. Minders grew to accept that **they** were valued, even when what they did was frowned on. They could be sure that the playleader would say what she really thought – sometimes favouring 'authority' and some-

times not, but at times able to explain 'why' and to suggest constructive ways of approaching problems and people.

Then came a period of expansion initiated by the minders themselves who canvassed minders to support the group. New minders were drawn in from the evening meetings, from interest roused in jumble sales and from outings. Two Open Evenings held during Playgroup Week helped to reach parents and to strengthen and encourage minders' pride and pleasure in the Centre.

A phase of 'cliques' ensued, when some minders stayed away from the Centre because of another's presence there.

These tensions were gradually resolved by consistent home visiting by the Playleader, the Project worker and the social worker. The group grew in strength, the members being able to tolerate each other as individuals as well as able and willing to speak out as a group.

Transition to Social Services

It was the incipient strength of group feeling, then at an aggressive stage, which was an important factor in deciding how the Project should proceed once the council had decided the future role of the premises.

Islington Borough Council's intention (March 1976) was to convert the Mitford Road premises, which were no longer suitable for a day nursery, into a resource for the use of voluntary groups called an 'Under Fives Centre'. An all-day playgroup would eventually cater for 24 children from 2½ - 5; there would also be a mother and toddler 'call-in' centre for isolated mothers living in cramped conditions and a childminders' Drop-in Centre. Each section would have its own staff; a Co-ordinator, accountable to a Management Group, would be responsible for the new Under Fives Centre.

It was decided that the Bunbury Group of Childminders should be integrated into this new Under-Fives Centre in the autumn of 1976 and so pass to Social Services three months ahead of schedule. This permitted a new Bunbury initiative, before the official end of the Project, in the premises originally intended for it.

2. THE HANLEY ROAD CENTRE

The new Childminders' Centre at the headquarters of the Hanley Road Area Improvement Project received three months funding from the Bunbury Trust, from January 1977 it depended on an annual playgroup grant received from the London Borough of Islington Social Services. The Co-ordinator and Inner London Pre-School Playgroups Association continued to give voluntary staff time until April 1978. In addition, the Joint Steering Group of the Hanley Road Area Improvement Project

gave a grant of £2,000 to the Centre for equipment in 1975/6.

The Childminders' Centre in the basement of a renovated Victorian terrace house opened two days a week in January 1977. It catered for minders and the children in their care who lived within pram-pushing distance. This included parts of the two Social Service areas of North Islington. The Centre provided play facilities for children under the guidance of a trained playleader together with social facilities and informal training for minders. Innovations included relief days for minders, a toy loan scheme and one-to-one play sessions for children in special need.

There were few registered minders in the area and the Centre therefore extended its scope to include mothers with young children.

After it had been open three months, this small Centre was catering for an average of five adults and ten children each session. Approximately ten minders and 20 children used the Centre regularly.

In April, 1978, a new Management Group, made up of minders and members of the local community with non-voting representatives from PPA, the Area Health Authority, the Hanley Road Area Improvement Scheme and Social Services, took responsibility for running the Centre.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These projects are small, localised examples of the rapidly expanding awareness of the needs and aspirations of childminders and the potential role of childminding in pre-school provision.

Evaluation can only be very tentative; one cannot assume that any changes and improvements were due solely to the influence of the Centre. There were many other possible reasons, notably increased support for minders from Social Services.

Nevertheless, the Projects coincided with a clarification of minders' needs and the raising of standards. It is reasonable to suppose they played an important part by providing stimulating play for the children and broadening discussion among minders on general issues relating to them and to child care.

Experience suggests the following:–

1. Each locality is different and calls for careful enquiry before a project begins.
2. Drop-in Centres can provide useful focal points for groups of minders and the children in their care and contribute to observable improvements in the quality of minding. They can extend their influence through home visiting beyond the 50%-75% of minders who are

likely to make use of them.

3. Changes in attitudes to child care observed at the Centres and during home visits cannot be expected to persist without continuing support and stimulus; it takes time to begin to change attitudes and for new ideas to take root and grow.
4. Minders' contribution to the Centres can be substantial, but formal responsibility will probably only appeal to a small nucleus.
5. Groups seem to pass through clear stages in development. The length of time each takes varies from group to group, but progress is more secure if all are allowed to work themselves through.
6. Independent, voluntary workers are most likely to succeed in getting a wide range of minders to come to Drop-in Centres.
7. Close co-operation between the Local Authority and the voluntary body is essential. This implies tolerance and shared understanding of respective roles as well as agreement in the ways objectives are to be achieved. Autonomy of a project is also indicated if unique benefits are to be derived from this co-operation.
8. A Support Group can work well, provided it is united and the Project workers do not feel overwhelmed by it. It should perform the dual functions of admistration and support and, if required, arrange for monitoring – preferably by an independent body.
9. Funding should be made available in flexible terms so that adjustments can be made in the light of changing needs.
10. Questions of confidentiality can pose problems. Some social workers are trained to the ethic of shared confidentiality. The situation which arises when minders confide in a project worker and ask her not to let it go further needs to be thoroughly discussed and a common policy agreed before a Project begins.

With regard to staffing:–

11. Playgroup qualifications are strongly recommended. Above all, people with mature outlooks on all relationships are needed, who can relate both to the statutory and the voluntary bodies while still retaining their own identity with all kinds of minders, mothers and children. Impartiality is vital. This, together with genuine caring and a thorough understanding of the job, is almost more important than any one 'professional' qualification.
12. In the early stages of a project, three workers are preferable to one worker putting in the same number of hours. They provide mutual support and can each contribute particular skills and insights.
13. Adequate support for the project workers is crucial. Work in a Drop-in Centre is demanding; it can be very rewarding but it can also be

frustrating, draining and depressing. Support and guidance should be available from a group of informed and committed people; they should preferably live locally and not have commitments which prevent them from visiting the Centres.

14. Workers should be paid from the beginning on an established scale to ease transition from one employing body to another.

With regard to Centres.–

15. Premises should be available from the outset. They need not be beautiful, but they should be adequately heated and any problems with shared accommodation clarified before the project gets under way.
16. Provision during school holidays is greatly appreciated by minders. Breaks for school holidays tend to disrupt the development of centres, but sometimes pose problems for project workers' own families.
17. Sustained home visiting is crucial.
18. Teaching by dicussion and self-realisation is both feasible and rewarding. The danger of the informal approach is that support and socialisation become ends in themselves. Aims and objectives need to be kept in view and continually reassessed.
19. Constant vigilance is needed if an 'in-group' of established users is not to form which inhibits or discourages the casual caller.
20. Minders have every right not to use a service and not to join in; the important thing is to establish and maintain lines of communication. Home visiting plays an important role.
21. Future projects should include a study of parents and children.
22. Co-operation between the statutory and voluntary sectors can result in worthwhile support for childminders and the children in their care. The Projects are examples of the ways such Schemes develop according to local needs and the skills of the Project workers, they have greatly benefited from help and advice from others working in the field. This has underlined advantages to be gained from sharing ideas, insights and experience.

References:

Osborne, B. (1975) Working Mothers and Child Minders in the Central District of Lewisham.

A fuller report on the Hanley Road Centre can be obtained from, **The Secretary. Hanley Road Area Improvement Project, 43 Hanley Road, London N4**